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**Using Reflective Practice to Support Management Student Learning:
Three Brief Assignments**

THIRD REVISION

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Key words: Management Education; Reflective Practice; Brief Exercises

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Abstract

Reflective practice supports critical thinking and assessment skills through analyzing one's own life experiences, and the role of reflection in learning has been long recognized. However, drawbacks of many reflective practice assignments are their broad scope and lengthy written requirements. I propose that the reflection process is robust enough to support management student learning through short written tasks as well. Three examples of brief reflective assignments are presented suitable for management educators teaching undergraduate, graduate, or non-credit learners: (1) writing an organizational story; (2) a reflection about learning from adversity; and (3) a goal-oriented personal change. Learning outcomes and student responses have been positive, and the assignments have also been an insightful teaching experience for the instructor.

Key words: Management Education, Reflective Practice; Brief Exercises

**Using Reflective Practice to Support Management Student Learning:
Three Brief Assignments**

Reflective practice, the habit of looking back and analyzing one's own life experiences, is a process that supports learning and develops critical thinking skills. The role of reflection in learning has been recognized for decades (Dewey, 1938; Schon, 1983; Richardson, 2005/2006), and the reflective observation learning style may provide an important means of deepening student understanding and engagement (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Raelin & Coghlan, 2006). Many management educators recommend reflective practice for managerial and professional development (Dehler & Edmonds, 2006; Hedberg, 2008; Quijada, McGrath, & Wheaton, 2016). According to Whetten and Cameron (2011), learning to reflect is a key element in mastering the important management skill of self-awareness, and a literature review about management competencies and reflective practice by Segon and his colleagues notes, "in order for managers to develop, they need to reflect socially on action and experience" (2010:185).

Some scholars have noted that convincing business students to implement reflective practice may be particularly challenging for several reasons (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004; Gray, 2007). As a professional discipline, management education must grapple with a theory/practice dichotomy and the call for demonstrable bottom-line results; reflective practice may seem like navel-gazing to some overworked managers. Part-time MBA students and executive education participants in particular may resist spending time in reflection, as many are already juggling a full-time job, school, and perhaps family obligations. Further, business school curricula include many quantitative

courses that require narrowly-focused, linear thinking—classic “left brain” activities—but reflection draws on “right brain” processes such as intuition and creativity.

Thoughtful reflection thus represents a learning tool that requires participants to engage in more holistic approaches to critical thinking and analysis, integrating both brain hemispheres towards effective learning (Lindell & Kidd, 2011; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Quijada et al., 2016). As Hedberg notes, “When we reflect, we give the learning a space to be processed, understood, and more likely integrated into further thoughts and actions” (2008, p. 2). The assignments discussed here seek to teach course concepts through using reflection, drawing on Argyris’s (1991) construct of double-loop learning. The exercises were developed to encourage students to consider and challenge their underlying assumptions and values through reflecting on their own experiences.

Assignments to foster reflective practice are used in numerous ways, ranging from independent written analyses to in-class exercises (Cunliffe, 2004; McNeely, 2000) to personal journals (Betts, 2004). The focus of reflective practice may be an academic subject (e.g., Leadership), the individual him or herself (My Role as a Leader), or the broader context (Why are Leaders Important in Organizations?). Reflective learning may involve individuals, groups, or organizations (Smart & Csapo, 2007; Segon et al., 2010), and it may be done privately or collectively (Hedberg, 2008).

One major drawback of many reflective assignments is their scope, in that they require intensive, frequent reflection and corresponding lengthy assessment over time (Verkler et al., 2001). Not all courses lend themselves to a long reflection assignment, and not all instructors have time to review reams of reflective text. I propose that the process of reflective practice is robust enough to foster engaged student learning, even in

small doses (Smart & Csapo, 2007). The assignments presented here provide an option for management instructors seeking opportunities to teach class concepts through brief reflective tasks. Student learning objectives for using these exercises include:

- Connecting management class concepts with a professional or personal experience
- Reflecting on this experience to analyze what happened, why, and the potential for change (Argyris, 1991)
- Developing self-awareness in recognizing the student's place in the experience

The Appendices outline the assignment directions, provide learning outcomes, suggest guidance for debriefing, and offer a sample rubric to assist in instructor grading. The three tasks include writing an organizational story (Appendix A); a reflection about learning from adversity (Appendix B); and an individual change intervention (Appendix C). Instructions for each assignment are intentionally “generic” to allow for instructor use in multiple contexts. Appendix D discusses some of the challenges of these reflective assignments, and Appendix E offers a grading rubric that may be adapted to each exercise.

Reflective Assignment #1: The Organization Story

The first application of reflective practice involves writing a brief organizational story. Stories foster learning because they enable participants to communicate about their experiences, concerns, and dilemmas they face (Abma, 2003; Schor, Sims, & Dennehy, 1996). Organization narratives provide an opportunity for sense-making about management issues such as a leader's goals, an employee's behavior, or an organization's

culture (Parry & Hansen, 2007; Gray, 2007; Watson, 2001), and they often identify commonalities across experiences (Martin, et. al, 1983). Appendix A outlines the parameters for Assignment 1, in which students use a personal experience in an organization to which they have belonged (worked, studied, or volunteered) to write a reflective organization story.

Reflective Assignment #2: Learning from Adversity

Many life lessons deal with some variation of overcoming challenges: the “using lemons to make lemonade” metaphor. The second reflective practice application focuses on lessons learned from adversity, an example of critical incident analysis (Gray, 2007). Participants are asked to reflect on a situation, either personal or professional, in which they were less successful than anticipated, and to consider what lessons were learned in coping with these difficult circumstances. Appendix B presents the assignment parameters, learning objectives, and examples of student responses about learning from challenges.

Reflective Assignment #3: The Personal Change Intervention

Appendix C outlines this reflective project, which asks students to identify something in their own lives they would like to change, either professionally (e.g., resolving a conflict at work) or personally (e.g., begin training for a marathon). This assignment demonstrates the process of change, in that *planning for* and actually *implementing* change are different (Berggren & Soderlund, 2011). Appendix C includes examples of students’ personal change goals and debriefing guidance, as well as change outcomes from a sample of 92 students from three MBA classes.

General Instructions for Implementing these Assignments

I have used these three reflective practice examples for nearly a decade in different management classes, as one of several required assignments for each course. They provide an alternative learning technique to the standard business class fare of in-class examinations and team projects. The projects have worked well for classes of 20 to 50 students, and for undergraduate Introduction to Management courses as well as MBA graduate courses in Organizational Behavior, Organizational Change and Development, and General Management. The projects are also suitable for non-credit executive education, and they can be applied in most organizational contexts (e.g., a volunteer non-profit or a corporation) and in an e-learning format as well.

Like any teaching tool, these assignments should be used appropriately. Given the sensitive nature of personal reflections, I suggest the projects be implemented as confidential individual written assignments. Ideally, they can be combined with an in-class or online debriefing session to link the assignment objective with student reflection. The instructor may summarize (in advance) the themes chosen by the (anonymous) participants, and use these summaries to guide class discussion. While many students love to share their own experiences, the debriefing must maintain confidentiality as well as respect for the inevitable differences in perspective. N.B. Occasionally, a student paper may present the instructor with a difficult personal situation (such as a reported suicide attempt) requiring outside guidance from other trained professionals.

Learning Outcomes and Implications

Learning from these assignments may be assessed in multiple ways, including different evaluation frameworks (an instructor's grading rubric v. student reports), as well as different approaches to implementation. These were graded projects, so the sample

rubric in Appendix E offers suggestions for reviewing students' work for evidence of critical reflection. One exercise variation I have tried is assigning the same personal reflection paper twice—once at the beginning of the course, and again at the end of the course. This technique allows for direct comparison to a baseline—by instructor *and* students—of measurable learning achieved. Assignment #3, the Personal Change Intervention, was developed specifically to analyze the link between learning (cognition) and doing (behavior): reflecting on the progress of considering a course of action, then planning it, implementing it, and finally sustaining it over time (consider one's annual New Year's resolutions).

Another performance metric is student response, and reactions to these three brief assignments have been quite positive. Students consistently rank the projects favorably (between 4 and 5 on a 5-point Likert scale) in their regular end-of-term teacher/course evaluations. Many also comment on the important role of self-reflection in self-knowledge (Schon, 1983; Hedberg, 2008). For example, one student reflected, “This intervention challenged me...as I assumed the role of an internal change agent while [concurrently] being the change I wanted to see. This dual role has been an awesome learning experience, as simultaneously seeking to change others and myself proved tricky yet highly rewarding...and though not all of the rewards of refreezing have come to fruition, there is no doubt that not a single one of us [in the class] wants to go back to where we were 10 weeks ago.”

Further, the exercise debriefing process has provided numerous “teachable moments.” The wide range of perspectives shared offers a useful springboard for classroom discussion about differing points of view based on age, work experience, and

socio-economic background. For example, many of my undergraduate students are international, and their reflections about competition, capitalism, and work values enrich our debriefing sessions with their multiple perspectives. Depending on classroom demographics, debate may also ensue about management topics such as motivation or work/family priorities. To illustrate, one married older student shared the following reflection, which generated much class discussion: “A by-product of this project has been my renewed patience with my husband... the poster child for resistance to change. He does things a certain way, his mother does them that way, and his grandmother does them that way (some powerful forces against change). But what I’ve also realized is how difficult it is to get someone to change when they don’t believe “it,” whatever that “it” is, needs to be changed. I’m like a new CEO or manager coming in to introduce change to three generations of my husband’s family...I’ve learned that it’s not enough to show others the way or provide concrete data that show there is a better way. They have to personally feel it, believe it, perceive it, and take ownership of it before a change occurs—and that can take some time.”

Finally, these assignments were interesting for me. Not only did the analyses provide some thought-provoking insights, but I also found them an opportunity to connect with students in a more personal way. Many students thanked me in writing for the assignment and the experience: e.g., “Thank you for the opportunity to work on myself. I don't always like what I find out, but it always helps” and “I found this assignment to be of great personal value, and thank you for the challenge.” As McNeely (2000) argues, using students’ personal experiences can make teaching “easier, richer, more enjoyable, and more fun” (p. 520).

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Appendix A

Reflective Assignment #1: The Organization Story

Once Upon a Time: Telling an Organization Story

Assignment Description

Organization stories are one way of sharing knowledge about a company, its leaders, or its employees. Stories may provide vivid examples of important management concepts, such as describing an organization's culture, clarifying a leader's strategy, or emphasizing employee values.

This assignment asks you to use a personal experience at an organization to which you have belonged (worked, studied, volunteered, or participated in some form) to write an organization story.

- Reflect on your experience in this organization, and describe the situation background and outcome in a story format (1-2 pages). You may describe the circumstances using a “news article” approach, or your story may be a personal narrative (with or without dialogue).
- Which class concepts are relevant in explaining ‘what happened’?
- In your story, think about and comment on what lessons you learned about this organization. How could these lessons be applied to other organizations? (another 1-2 pages)
- Be sure to include at least three recommendations you could make for ‘next time.’

- Keep your story simple and short (3-5 pages total). Crafting a concise organization story provides the opportunity to hone your writing skills.

Learning Objectives:

1. To reflect about the experience, the organizational context, and your role.
 2. To describe how key components about an organization, its leaders, and its employees may be highlighted in a story format.
 3. To reflect on how these components connect with class concepts in organizational behavior and performance.
 4. To learn that stories about organizations may share common themes, with implications for both employees and managers.
 5. To develop writing skills needed for effective business communication.
-

Excerpts from Two Students' Stories

Example 1: The Racist Boss and Company Morale

I used to work for a company that was part of a large international conglomerate. Walking into the place, you felt like you were transported back in time to fifty years ago. Outdated furniture, dilapidated filing cabinets, and obsolete office equipment were crammed tightly into narrow hallways and offices. Unfortunately, the old-fashioned environment wasn't only relegated to inanimate things. My boss, you see, had some VERY old-fashioned ideas of his own.

People of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds were employed there. This, however, did not stop my boss from offering his derogatory opinions about [the different] races and ethnicities. I found myself apologizing to my coworkers for things MY BOSS had said. Finally, I had enough. I went to Human Resources to let them know my boss's behavior was affecting the rest of our department in terms of productivity and morale. Motivation was zero. While they thanked me for bringing this to their attention—and informed me that this was not the first complaint they had received—my boss continued to go unreprimanded.

Soon after that incident I decided to quit. I couldn't work for a company that protected someone whose views were so outdated and inherently wrong. I still converse with people who work there, and have found that my former boss hasn't changed. Morale and motivation haven't improved. I learned that even a company with deep pockets, strong revenues, and extensive resources cannot fix or improve culture. A strong culture starts with the people you recruit, and more importantly, those that you decide to keep on your roster.

Example 2: Learning despite a Restructure

Halfway through my internship at ABC Company, the firm suffered a huge loss to its operations, resulting in layoffs of about half the employees in my building. There was immediate shock, and then the realization of the need to restructure. The remaining employees, along with their manager, were forced to innovate and create new ways of obtaining clients to stay afloat.

I was able to observe a fantastic manager advocate for her staff during this time of crisis and change. This manager's main goal involved creating written proof of her

employees' skills and then marketing them to firms outside the organization. This process showed that she viewed her employees as extremely competent. She worked towards this goal with charisma and an unfaltering positive attitude in the midst of organizational breakdown. During one meeting, I remember her inspirational speech about the need to restructure.

Although not everyone at the firm saw this manager "in action," she made a big impact on me. Because I was only a summer intern, I wasn't around to see what happened later at the company. But I learned a lot from her positive attitude about how one person can make a difference. I think this story displays a great moral of an organization's need to adapt to its outside surroundings. Innovation is beneficial in this adaptation. Managers must keep employees motivated and energized to successfully change for the benefit of their organization. It's also an example of a great manager.

Debriefing the Exercise and Linking to Learning Outcomes

Debriefing Guidance to the Instructor:

After the students have submitted their written assignments and I've graded them, we review the assignment outcomes together in class. **Advance work for the instructor** includes preparing a summary (or representative examples) of the responses to questions 3 and 4 below. If the class is small, excerpts from all papers may be included in the summary; with more students, the more vivid examples may be shared. Confidentiality is preserved because the instructor presents the material with names removed (instead of asking students to raise their hands to share their responses).

Note: My preference is to debrief the exercise *before* returning the graded assignment to the students, so their focus remains on the story outcomes instead of on their grades.

Questions to Guide Class Discussion

(10-15 minutes)* 1. *How did the process of reflecting about your organizational experience help your own learning?* Sample responses from in-class discussions, student papers, and course evaluations have included:

- Writing this story helped me learn about company values.
- By reviewing this company in detail, I also was able to better understand the bigger picture.
- Reflecting on my experience forced me to see some connections I didn't realize before.

(5-10 minutes)* 2. *What was easy/hard about writing your organizational story?* Sample responses:

- I like thinking and writing about my own experiences.
- This was a fun assignment and got me thinking.
- I'm not a writer; this assignment was hard.

(15-20 minutes)* 3. *Looking at the summary of class responses, what class concepts were relevant?* Examples:

- Organizational culture: the importance of good culture, values, and trust; the impact of negative culture and injustice
- Leader strategy: poor treatment of employees reflects badly on the leader and on the company

- Motivation: treating employees well, as family, impacts their job engagement
- Communication: strong links may drive success; lack of communication may cause failure

(10-15 minutes)* 4. *Present some story themes on the board (or in a PowerPoint slide), and ask the class to assign them into 'Positive' and 'Negative' themes. Examples:*

'Positive' Story Themes

- The true company hero arises in the midst of turmoil.
- If a company can integrate new employees and keep current ones going, it will ensure that employees stay motivated during times of change.
- Trust is key in situations of stress and conflict.

'Negative' Story Themes

- What looks good in theory may not work in real life.
- Lack of communication can lead to lower morale and even people quitting the firm.
- Plucking a great manager from one office to perform the same function in another office will not always be successful or effective.

(5 minutes)* 5. *Return graded papers to the students.*

* Approximate time for each discussion point, geared to a 45-50 minute class period

Additional Notes:

MBA students and executive education participants may find this assignment easier to complete, compared to undergraduate students. Because young undergraduates have limited work experience in organizations, I've found they are most likely to write stories about a manager's actions that impacted the students directly.

Appendix B

Reflective Assignment #2: Learning From Adversity

Learning from Adversity

Assignment Description

Many life lessons deal with some variation of overcoming challenges: the “using lemons to make lemonade” metaphor. This assignment asks you to reflect on what you learned from a situation in which you were less successful than you had expected to be.

Think of something in your personal or professional life that was in some way a “lemon”.

It could be a situation over which you had some control—or not.

- Briefly (1 page) describe the circumstances.
- Reflect on what you experienced—and how you responded—to this situation (another 2-3 pages). Was this problem “your fault” or attributed to outside factors? Did the situation cause you to challenge your assumptions, and/or look at things differently?
- Be sure to include relevant class concepts in your analysis.
- Discuss at least three recommendations you would make (to yourself, or to the organization involved) or insights you gained about learning to “use lemons to make lemonade.” (1 page).

Your grade will NOT be determined by the situation and its negative or positive outcome.

It WILL be determined by your thoughtfulness and insight, as well as your application of

class concepts in your reflective analysis. The assignment also provides the opportunity to hone your writing skills.

Learning Objectives:

1. To reflect about challenging experiences and their impact in personal and professional situations.
 2. To consider how adversity (although potentially quite painful) may have actually contributed to a student's learning and development.
 3. To explore how the "lemons to lemonade" metaphor may generate lessons learned both for the individual involved and within the organizational context.
 4. To develop writing skills needed for effective business communication.
-

Excerpts from Two Students' Reflective Analyses about Learning from Adversity

Example 1

"She changed my slide."

"What?" I asked in response to my manager's incredulous statement. "We're presenting to the client in five minutes—what are we going to do?"

My manager and I had been the guinea pigs in the newest application of an integrated marketing communications project handed down from the client. As multicultural media specialists, we were told to fully collaborate with the General Marketing team—this, despite 10 years of research that showed our multicultural operations should be kept separate. Everyone in the firm (we thought) considered the integration a bad idea, but the client insisted. Then, right before a client presentation, the

General Media Director (my boss's boss) changed our proposal by decreasing our budget and giving the funds to her pet project. The client presentation was a disaster. The conflict within the firm was worse.

Just because something sounds good on paper doesn't mean it works in real life. Two separate groups were told to work together, but without incentives, consequences, or leadership to steer the integration and unite goals. Neither party was motivated to change their ways and fully communicate with the other group, because nothing would happen if they didn't. What resulted was a supposedly integrated team that, instead of working together, fought against each other. People used new information available after the integration to create resentment and fierce competition, where there wasn't before.

Example 2

Scanning my apartment, I see coats hanging over dining room chairs, books and magazines piled high on my coffee table, black and gold legwarmers in the living room chair, a bathroom cluttered with makeup and hair irons, piles of clothes and towels strewn all over my bedroom. It's sufficient to say that my goal—To Keep My Apartment Clean—failed...I now fully grasp how a goal so easily stated on paper can fall apart when coming to fruition. The devil really is in the details....

This failed attempt will not stop me. Learning to become a neater person and appreciating what I have are still very important goals to me. When rethinking the problem, I now wonder if perhaps I should spend 20-30 minutes a day tidying up, or if I can make more regular trips to the Laundromat. Is there any way I can make cleaning seem exciting or rewarding? Perhaps cleaning can serve as a time to meditate and reflect, as opposed to rushing through tedious chores during the day.

Debriefing the Exercise and Linking to Learning Outcomes

Debriefing Guidance to the Instructor:

After the students have submitted their written assignments and I've graded them, we review the assignment outcomes together in class. **Advance work for the instructor** includes preparing a summary (or representative examples) of the responses to questions 2 and 3 below. If the class is small, excerpts from all papers may be included in the summary; with more students, the more vivid examples may be shared. Confidentiality is preserved because the instructor presents the material with names removed (instead of asking students to raise their hands to share their responses).

Note: My preference is to debrief the exercise *before* returning the graded assignment to the students, so their focus remains on the learning from lemons discussion instead of on their grades.

Questions to Guide Class Discussion

(10-15 minutes)* 1. *What is the impact of challenging circumstances, for both individuals and organizations? Is (periodic) lack of success inevitable?* Common themes from in-class discussion:

- Coping with challenges may be: Embarrassing, painful, unexpected, humiliating, a wake-up call, motivating, demotivating
- Failure is part of the human condition; nobody is perfect.

- The difficult thing about...responding to adversity is that it takes constant buy-in and commitment...it is about self-leadership.
- Nothing at work ever goes 100% right.

(15-20 minutes)* 2. *Was the process of reflecting about situations in which you were less successful than you anticipated helpful in your own learning?* Illustrations from in-class discussion and course evaluations:

- It's something important I haven't thought about before.
- Thinking about difficult challenges is like a deep dive into examining the trial-and-error process. I learned some lessons for the future.
- *Excerpt from a student paper:*

This was an interesting exercise. It prompted me to reflect on past experiences... [and] helped me to determine what I could have done differently...I see now how I could have taken different actions. There is no assurance that the situation would have been entirely different, yet I would have felt better about it, both personally and professionally.

(10-15 minutes)* 3. *Looking at the summary of class responses, what patterns do you see in the recommendations or lessons learned (the "lemons to lemonade" metaphor)?*

Examples have included:

At the Organizational or Group Level

- Even if the appropriate data is shared, a lack of communication between management and employees may derail a planned organizational change.
- Improving employee attitudes may not be possible if the corporate culture is negative and resistant.

At the Individual Level

- The student's inability to manage his own work/life balance led to a failure in law school.
- Not understanding a new work environment caused problems both in assimilating to the student's new position and in being accepted by her co-workers.

(5 minutes)* 4. *Return graded papers to the students.*

* Approximate time for each discussion point, geared to a 45-50 minute class period

Additional Notes

Students of all ages and backgrounds can relate to lack of expected success, so this exercise works well at multiple levels. My classroom experience has been that more mature graduate or executive education students are more willing to acknowledge their "lemons," compared to young undergraduates (ever the optimists!).

Appendix C

Reflective Assignment #3: The Personal Change Intervention

Change Your Life During This Term: A Personal Change

Assignment Description

Identify something in your personal or professional life that you would like to change. Be sure to select an intervention target that is feasible within the one-term time frame, and an intervention over which YOU have control. While the time frame is short, many important changes do happen in an accelerated time period.

Your goal is to commit to this change by Class 2, with the change in process by mid-term, and have this change clearly implemented by our last class. Your change target can be professional (e.g., resolve a conflict at work; update your resume and meet with a career counselor) or personal (e.g., work through a family conflict; train for a marathon).

Commit to this change intervention with a two-sentence, typed (or e-mailed) specific change goal due BY CLASS 2. (All change goals will be kept anonymous).

For example: By the mid-term, I commit to joining Arthur Murray Dance Studio. By the end of the term, I commit to knowing how to dance the salsa. Have this change in process by the mid-term, and submit a one-paragraph progress report of your change intervention.

Your final paper (3-4 pages), which should be a reflective analysis of your change intervention and its outcome, is due by the last class. In your paper, please evaluate the outcome of your personal change intervention using the following four-point scale, as one metric for measuring change effectiveness:

1	2	3	4
Goal Achieved	Lots of Progress	Some Progress	Little or No Progress

Reflect on why this outcome happened. In pages 1-2, consider questions such as, Were you satisfied with your change progress and outcome? Why or why not? What strategies did you use to support your personal change? In pages 3-4, discuss, What did you learn from this experience? Be sure to include at least three recommendations or lessons learned from this assignment.

Please know that your grade for this assignment will NOT be determined by the “success” or “failure” of your personal change intervention based on the scale above. It WILL be determined by your thoughtfulness, insight, and application of class concepts in your reflective analysis. The assignment also provides the opportunity to hone your writing skills.

Learning Objectives:

1. To reflect about the process of personal or professional change and its challenges.
 2. To demonstrate some helpful change techniques, such as goal commitment, progress reports, and specific metrics to measure achievement.
 3. To consider thoughtfully the short-term and long-term outcomes of change. For example, even change not achieved may offer important ‘lessons learned,’ both for the individual and within the organizational context.
 4. To develop writing skills needed for effective business communication.
-

Examples of Students' Personal Change Goals

- By week 5, I commit to doing some kind of physical activity (i.e., running, walking) two times a week for at least a half hour. By week 10, I commit to working out 3 times a week for at least 45 minutes.
 - I commit to quitting smoking once and for all. By class 10, I commit to being a 100% non-smoker (no cheating at social events).
 - By Week 5, I commit to promoting my new rock 'n' roll band. By Week 10, I commit to performing new songs at a yet-to-be determined booking.
 - By Class 5, I will have registered with the career center and met with a career counselor. By Class 10, I will have completed an updated, professional resume.
 - My personal change goal is to build my professional network. During the next 10 weeks, I commit to adding at least 3 contacts to my LinkedIn network each week (>30 new contacts by Week 10).
 - By Class 5, I plan to investigate available positions at other offices of my company. By Class 10, I will schedule a one-on-one meeting with my manager to discuss job transfer opportunities.
-

Debriefing Guidance to the Instructor:

This assignment requires **two assessments during the term**: the mid-term progress report and the final paper. I use the mid-term report as an opportunity to check in with the students' personal change and to help them keep on task (no grade is assigned for the progress report). The final reflective paper remains the focus of the graded assignment.

In-class discussion occurs throughout the term and includes the following three elements:

- a. After the students have submitted their written change goals, the instructor prepares an anonymous list of the goals and shares them with the class. This step engages students through comparing their own goals with the changes their classmates have chosen.
- b. At the mid-term point, I share brief (anonymous) comments from the progress reports and perhaps a simple summary (e.g., ‘about one-third of your classmates report they are on target with their personal change’).
- c. When the students have submitted their final reflective paper and I’ve graded them, we review the personal change outcomes together in class. **Advance work for the instructor** includes preparing a summary of the students’ self-assessment on the four-point scale noted in the assignment. As a point of comparison, I collected data from n=92 students from three MBA classes, and the following outcomes were reported:

16 (17%) reported Goal Achieved

42 (46%) reported Lots of Progress

29 (32%) reported Some Progress

5 (5%) reported Little or No Progress

The instructor may also choose to compile in advance student responses to Question 3 below. Confidentiality is preserved because the instructor presents the material with names removed (instead of asking students to raise their hands to share their responses).

Questions to Guide Class Discussion

(10-15 minutes)* 1. *Now that this assignment is completed, what are your opinions about making a personal change? What made the process of your change effective or ineffective?* Sample responses from in-class discussion:

- My personal change went pretty well; I feel a sense of achievement.
- I was way too optimistic about choosing my change goal; I feel like a failure.
- Having to report in kept me on task. I would do that step again in the future.

(10-15 minutes)* 2. *With this class behind you, and knowing more about implementing change, what would you do the same (or differently) in another personal change?*

Examples of student responses during class discussions and from course evaluations:

- I would select a more manageable change goal.
- I was dedicated to this assignment at the beginning, but then I lost interest. I need to develop a change strategy that fits better with my lifestyle.

(15-20 minutes)* 3. *Upon reflection, what are some of the important lessons you learned about planned change from this exercise, either for an individual or within the organizational context?* Examples of student reflective comments from the written assignment:

- I realized why the change was necessary and would be beneficial to me in the end, but I lacked the desire to overcome the various resistances to the change.
- I believe I accepted my change project with enthusiasm and commitment. While I didn't exactly meet my goal, I still feel stronger and healthier for having attempted this change.

- The students in class, who had great change goals, were motivational because it felt like we were making positive changes together.
- This was a great exercise - thank you! The constant class reminders and encouragement helped keep these goals top of mind, which contributed to the change.

(5 minutes)* 4. *Return graded papers to the students.*

* Approximate time for each discussion point, geared to a 45-50 minute class period

Additional Notes

Participant buy-in is critical for this exercise. Thus, while it works across age groups, younger students may be more eager to take on the change challenge, compared to older students—especially those with complicated lives including work, family, and school.

Appendix D

Challenges Experienced During the Reflective Assignments

While student responses to these exercises have been generally positive, the assignments do present some challenges. First, many students are unfamiliar with reflective practice and may perceive this learning technique as inappropriate for a business school class. According to one student's course evaluation, "I didn't learn anything from the reflection paper, and I feel it's unfair to be graded on a creative writing assignment in an MBA class." To address this challenge, I emphasize the importance of reflection in supporting the key managerial skill of self-awareness, the benefit of having multiple tools to draw on from one's managerial toolbox, and the need for strong writing skills in effective business communication.

A related issue is the potential discomfort some students experience in reflection and self-analysis. One student wrote, "I didn't take this class as a group therapy session. This is supposed to be a management course." One solution to this challenge is to point out how much of management is involved with intangibles; e.g., individual emotions, group norms, and organizational culture. The reflective process offers an opportunity to analyze these often-overlooked—yet important—issues in a systematic way.

A few students have considered these assignments as lacking in rigor, certainly not to be compared with the stringent quantitative analyses required in a finance course. One complained, "This assignment had no relevance to real organizational issues—what a waste of time." For these non-believers, I've linked the assignments to the importance of learning people skills as well as numbers skills in developing managerial expertise.

In addition to the general issues of reflective practice, each individual assignment also has its special challenges, as outlined below.

Assignment #1, the Organization Story

- The narrative aspect may present difficulties (e.g., one student evaluation noted, “I’m not a writer—this assignment was hard”). Solution: emphasize the importance of honing one’s business writing skills.
- Students for whom English is a second language may need extra coaching.
- From the instructor’s perspective, grading a narrative story may take more time than grading a typical expository report.

Assignment #2, Learning from Adversity

- Students may hold conflicting opinions about defining “adversity” and “lemons;” in-class discussion of the initial assignment is helpful here.
- Some students may perceive the class as biased toward a negative view of organizations (e.g., “Why are we spending time studying unsuccessful instead of successful examples?”). This challenge generally resolves itself during the debriefing session about lessons learned from adversity.
- Comparing trivial setbacks with major failures can be challenging, both in the classroom debriefings and in grading. One remedy is to address this question upfront, specifying that the assignment is focused on *learning* from the lemons, whether they are small or large.

Assignment #3, the Personal Change

Reflective Practice Assignments-3rd REVISION

- Resistance from students about the time involved (e.g., “This assignment was unrealistic for a 10-week quarter”). While the time frame is short, it mirrors ‘real life’: many changes happen in an accelerated time period.
- Students who choose a difficult goal may become frustrated with the class itself. This challenge may be overcome by reviewing each student’s initial change goals and redirecting overly-ambitious students into more manageable objectives.
- No real commitment to the change and a consequent shallow reflective paper (with a correspondingly low grade). Typical of almost any class assignment.

Appendix E

Sample Grading Rubric for a Reflective Assignment

Assignment: Individual paper, typed, double-spaced
Exercise: [Summarize main parameters]
Outcome: 100 points possible (or another point scoring format/number)*

Relevance of Topic Chosen (for story/adversity/personal change) _____/5

Explanation of Situation (story/adversity/personal change) _____/15

Evidence of Reflection _____/30

- soundness of interpretation
- impact on self and on others
- link to prior experiences
- contribution to learning and development

Lessons Learned/Recommendations (at least three) _____/15

Connection to Course Content _____/20

Writing Style, Clarity, Grammar and Spelling _____/15

**Point allocations are suggestions only and should be adapted to match instructor preferences.*